69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM 1 Indochina
Laotians AM8



fluence with the river of a tributary; a small, somnolent and sanctified Manhattan Island. A main street has turnings down to the river on each side and a pagoda at every few yards, with a glittering roof and doors and pillars carved with a close pattern of gilded and painted designs. There is an infallible sense of colour, a blending of old gold and turquoise and of many greys; but the bonzes are continually at work, painting and carving and refurbishing, so that everything is just a little too new (an extraordinary complaint in Laos), too spruce, too odorous of freshly applied varnish. The roof finials glisten with new applied glass and china mosaic. The ancient, blunted features of lions and dragons get regular scrubbings, have their teeth painted dead white and are re-fitted, as required, with new eyes of green glass. A year or two's neglect might greatly improve Luang Prabang.

For all the briskness with which its holy places are maintained, the silence in Luang Prabang is only disturbed by the distant, classroom sounds of bonzes chanting in Pali, and the slow, mild booming of gongs. It is the home-town of the siesta and the Ultima Thule of all French escapists in the Far East. Europeans who come here to live soon acquire a certain, recognizable manner. They develop quiet voices, and gentle, rapt expressions. This is accompanied by the determined insouciance of the New Year's reveller. It is an attitude which is looked for and is put on like a false nose or a carnival hat. Laos-ized Frenchmen are like the results of successful lobotomy operations – untroubled and mildly libidinous. They salt their conversation with Laotian phrases, all of which express a harmoniously negative outlook. *Bo pen nhang*, which is continually to be heard, means no more than, 'It doesn't matter'. But said in Laotian it takes on the emphasis of a declaration of faith. Single men instantly take to themselves Laotian wives, completing their bride's happiness with the present of a superb bicycle, covered with mascots and pennants, and with chaplets of artificial flowers round the hub-caps, instead of the leather, dust-removing strap one sees in Europe. Several painters have retired here to escape the world,